King's police guard cut before his death

By Les Payne
Newsday Service

GARDEN CITY, N.Y. — Hours before the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was killed in Memphis on April 4, 1968, the city's top law-enforcement official, in the presence of men he identified as federal agents, removed one of the two detectives assigned to watch the civil rights leader.

Authorities said the removal was part of an emergency plan to protect the detective's life.

Ed Redditt, the black detective who was removed from his post, had prepared a contingency plan to enable the police to apprehend an assassin should an attempt be made on King's life at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. The plan, which was never implemented, involved sealing off a four-block area around the motel.

Police did not assign a replacement, but they did leave the detective's partner on duty.

From interviews and published stories, Newsday has learned that Redditt and his partner, both members of the Memphis Police intelligence unit, watched King and his staffers at the Lorraine through binoculars from the fire station across the street.

The two men had provided security for King and his party earlier, and they continued to keep the police informed of their movements and their visitors.

Memphis sanitation strike leaders surround King in 1968 photo

But Redditt and his partner, W.B. Richmond, both black, had withdrawn from their normal positions with the King party because their presence, following recent riots in Memphis, had angered young local blacks.

The police were particularly concerned about a violence-prone black group called the Invaders, who, though friendly with the non-violent King and his associates, had led the outbreak of violence and looting a week earlier. Newsday recently disclosed that some of the Invaders' leaders were FBI informers and that they had touched off the violence which was directly responsible for King's return to Memphis the day before his assassination.

After Redditt was removed from duty, he was told at police headquarters that the U.S. Secret Service had learned of a "contract" on his life. Redditt protested, saying he wanted to return to his post, but the city's public safety director at that time, Frank Holloman, insisted that he be removed.

At the meeting, Holloman, according to sources, introduced Redditt to a "Secret Service agent down from Washington, D. C." a man about six feet tall, weighing about 220 pounds. A Mississippi highway patrolman, Holloman said, had overheard someone threatening to go to Memphis to kill Redditt. The threat had allegedly been relayed to the U.S. Secret Service and the agent had flown down to deliver the message to the Memphis police and Redditt.

The man identified as the Secret Service agent verified Holloman's account, sources said. But an official of the U.S. Secret Service later said he had checked the agency's records and found no indication that an agent had been sent to Memphis at that time.

Enroute home with his polic guard, Redditt heard over the c radio that King had been shot by a assassin.

Three days later, the round-th clock guard watching Redditt was r moved and he was allowed to retu to work. The police never offered ar further explanation of the "contract on his life.

About a week before King w killed, sources said, FBI informe had told Memphis police that Redd had shown sympathy for King cause by encouraging striking ga bage workers—who were being su ported by King's nonviolent march —to stay away from work.

Redditt's partner on the King su veillance team was considered mo loyal to the department, sources sai The partner remained at his post a was reportedly looking at Kin through binoculars when the civ rights leader was shot.

The Redditt affair is another in chain of curious circumstances su rounding King in the days and hou prior to his assassination.

Recent disclosures that the FI conducted intensive surveillance c King have prompted several gover mental inquiries.

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